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PEACUE RESISTANCE, 1968: THE INGENUITY OF CONVICTION

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PRAGUE RESISTANCE, 1968: THE INGENUITY OF CONVICTION

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It was clearly a major surprise to the Soviet Union that the combination of massive military force and kidnapping of the principal leaders did not lead to a state of collapse and confusion in Czechoslovakia. Instead, an organized and also a mass resistance immediately coalesced. This resistance is a superb achievement -- it may change the political possibilities for Czechoslovakia; it has definitely, in only seven days, left an indelible imprint on the country.

The mass resistance avoids violence, is mainly symbolic and occurred in its first phase in an entirely spontaneous manner. In the center of Prague thousands of people parade past the tens of tanks, wearing their Czech flag tricolor ribbons, photos of Dubcek or Svoboda and slogans; they avidly read the thousands of wallposters, cartoons, painted slogans which virtually flood the walls around the Wencelas Square. They run eagerly to the cars or couriers distributing the resistance press papers and pass the news on from

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The author is a member of the research staff of The RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, California. He was in Prague on vacation before and after the Soviet invasion until August 27, 1968. This article was written on August 28, 1968, and is cast in the present tense to reflect the then prevailing situation of a continuing resistance.

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one to the other. Thursday, Friday, Saturday (August 22-24) there was a crescendo of community among the people, who felt on the brink of another long harsh night.

There is a tangible, mutually reinforcing and invigorating relationship between the mass and the organized resistance. The mass resistance and the total absence of bureaucratic collaboration with the Soviet forces provide the environment in which the organized resistance has a chance to survive the specially imported KGB agents put on the trail. The mass resistance takes much of the energy and attention of the occupying troops. It keeps up the morale of those in the police, army and bureaucracy exposed to direct Soviet pressures. And, also, the mass, visible and continuing resistance acts as a warning to potential collaborators, either opportunists or the few who might have ideological reasons, a warning that the situation is still open and the Soviets aren't guaranteed a victory yet. As long as collaboration is prevented, the bargaining position of the Czech communist party is much stronger, there is less chance that the organized resistance can be extirpated and the Soviets have no anchor for any kind of government but an overt military occupation.

The organized resistance, through the vital clandestine radio transmitters and daily press, informs the people about what is really happening in the country, in both large and small ways, and provides leadership and focus for the mass resistance. Its primary tasks are to sustain and facilitate the unity of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and government organs against the occupation, to maintain the population's morale and to give both the political activists and

masses the sense that they are doing something against the Soviets. Information and a sense of some potency are undoubtedly the twin ingredients of enduring morale and cohesion.

The invasion began at 10:00 p.m. on Tuesday, August 20; Dubcek learned of it at 11:15 and immediately called a meeting of the CCP Presidium. By 1:30 a.m. the party and government had decided to resist the Soviet action with all means short of violence and to follow a policy of absolute non-collaboration with the occupying powers. Dubcek and the Prime Minister returned to their respective offices to wait and were arrested at 4 in the morning. By the same evening, August 21, the free radios and some freedom papers had appeared.

According to all information there had been no plans even of a contingency or exercise nature for resistance against this kind of aggression. But there were apparently some rough guidelines for the key party members including all members of the Party Congress in the event of war with the West. There also were arrangements for military radio communications in wartime which helped in the organization of the mobile and multiple clandestine radio networks.

The Clandestine Radios

The radio is the key element because it enables the party and other parts of the organized resistance to function. The best example of this was the calling of the 14th Extraordinary Party Congress on the day following the occupation (Thursday, August 22). The new presidium selected by this congress was more progressive than the one the Soviets feared would have been chosen in September.

The entire weight of the CCP moved with near unanimity to Dubcek's side (all but 5 to 10 of 1200 delegates). The resolutions denouncing the invasion and supporting the integrity of the party and the government and the explicit refutation of the Soviet pretense of an invitation to save the country from counterrevolution was the most central political event in the invasion's aftermath.

But it was an event only because of the free radio network. It was the radio which broadcast the resolutions of the party, the composition of the new presidium and the explicit denunciation of the invasion. The radio made this an event inside Czechoslovakia and outside Czechoslovakia -- both equally important in Soviet-Czech bargaining. Had there been no radio the news would have been suppressed or distorted, and the 14th Congress would not have had the immediate unifying effect it created.

Without the radio the party might not have been able to organize itself to hold the congress at all, much less so quickly. The radio told the party delegates in code that there would be a congress and where to go. Then when it was discovered that the Soviets had found out and were waiting, the radio told the people, the mass resistance, to spread the word all over Czechoslovakia that the party delegates not go to the appointed place but rather to the nearest large factory where they would receive further instructions. Thousands of people wore this sign on Thursday and wrote posters telling this to the party delegates. These warnings were successful and only several delegates were caught.

On Thursday evening the free radios announced that they had word

there would be large-scale arrests in the next two nights -- main victims would be journalists, writers, intellectuals and other political activists. To make the Soviet secret police's work more difficult, the people were asked to take down all street signs and house numbers in Prague. And within hours, thousands in all neighborhoods had finessed this new mode of urban concealment.

From Thursday on, the free radios through Czech police sources got hold of the license numbers of the cars used by the Russian police for arresting people. These would be broadcast and again the people would watch for the numbers and write them on posters and walls to spread the word. Whenever the cars were spotted they would be surrounded, the prisoner if any released and the occupants beaten while the car was destroyed. But after three difficult days the KGB got around this by getting duplicate license numbers of those held by Czech citizens -- and increasing the number of cars, using many as decoys. But still, three important days had been gained for people to hide or leave. And in all of these examples the leadership provided by nameless but trusted and admired voices of the free radios in combination with a chance to participate in a directly useful act had an enormously exhilarating effect. Even talking about these efforts was a great tonic to morale.

The Soviets seemed completely unprepared for this phenomenon of rapidly mobile, well-informed radio stations entirely overshadowing their propaganda efforts, and worse, informing the West of what was happening on an hour-to-hour basis. To silence this, teams of KGB were dispatched in Prague, Pilsen and parts of Slovakia -- their

methods restricted to the usual secret police repertoire. But on Friday (August 23) the free radio announced that the Soviets were sending in a train packed with jamming equipment. The radio asked the railway workers union to make sure that the train did not reach its destination, and within hours all over Czechoslovakia the station signs identifying the towns were destroyed or covered up. And there were hourly reports from railway union people saying "all is well," "train in difficulties" and the like. This was high drama -- the radio following the route of its would-be electronic executioners and then announcing toward the end of the next day -- "train lost." On Monday (August 26) the Soviets leapfrogged Czech resistance and flew bundles of jamming and detection equipment in by helicopter. How long do the free radio stations still have?

The Resistance Press

Within one day of the invasion, more than a score of freedom press newspapers were being distributed in all parts of Czechoslovakia. In Prague alone there were at least 14 papers on the streets by Friday (August 23). Most of these were put out by the staffs of the regular party, factory and commercial newspapers and carried the exact format as the normal papers had had. Among these are Vecerni Praha, organ of the young communist party, Rude Pravo, Mylady Svet and the new and very democratic papers published only since early 1968, Reporter and Student.

All of these newspapers have taken a fiercely anti-Soviet, anti-invasion position and emphasize as a common position the desire for neutrality, self-determination and the integrity of the party

and government. All support Dubcek, first secretary of the party, and Svoboda, the country's president. The papers publish photos of violent acts by occupation troops, of victims, fire and shot in buildings, of various secret CCP meetings and of anti-occupation demonstrations. The whole thrust is toward the mobilization of Czech and world opinion to act against the invaders with all means short of violence. The papers relay instructions from the free radio network to the people and perhaps most importantly keep the population informed about the negotiations between the Czech leaders and Warsaw Pact powers in Moscow. These talks, people feel, will decide the future; though few have any optimism about the outcome.

The papers are usually limited to one or three pages, but some circulate in three daily editions, within Prague at least. One paper has a verified production of 80,000 per edition daily, so an estimate of 400,000 for all papers in Prague is not at all unrealistic. As of Tuesday, August 27, there was no circulation of any pro-Soviet paper in Czechoslovakia except for propaganda leaflets dropped by helicopter and eagerly burned almost before touching ground! A pro-Soviet radio station was put into operation almost immediately after the debris of Wednesday's battle for the central broadcasting facilities had been cleared, but none listen except to mock. The Occupational Command has special radio and sound TV broadcasts in Russian and German for the troops and some distribution of Pravda and leaflets specifically for the armies.

As with the radio stations, the very existence of the resistance papers in spite of frenetic efforts to find and destroy them has a

major impact on morale and on the political cohesion of the Czech party and bureaucracies. Distributing and receiving papers have in themselves become important acts of non-provocative defiance. Small cars or trucks drive right into Wencelas Square and under the tank gun-barrels a sheaf of newspapers is eagerly sought by a surging crowd. If the soldiers make any move to capture the distributors the crowd keeps them away with its weight, and the little truck prances off. Distributors on foot, usually teenagers, carried papers openly until Sunday and went into the main centers of Prague. All people, old and young, members of the Czech police and army, reach out eagerly for the papers in a manifest gesture of support.

By Sunday, August 25, the occupation was increasingly cracking down on the distributors of the press. The tank-guard posts over every bridge halted all cars going into central Prague and made thorough searches. Soldiers made more serious efforts to catch the walking distributors and a more clandestine tempo resulted -- much more passing out of papers on the trams, or to the trams in outlying areas. On Sunday, with the sudden imposition of the bridge checkpoints, the first distributions were made by ambulances and Czech police cars were not searched. Again this tangible demonstration of unity, the police giving out the papers, at times under the eyes of the Soviet troops, had its effect on both the Czechs and the occupation. Parenthetically, the radio informed late Sunday night that Soviet troops had machine-gunned one police car and several ambulances after nightfall.

Effective Communication Networks

Within 24 hours of the occupation the free radios established themselves as accurately informed in detail about events in every part of Czechoslovakia, the West and in Moscow -- to the extent information was released. Broadcasting 24 hours a day and concerned solely with the crisis, the radio stations combined morale-boosting exhortation, intense analysis, coordination of mass and organized resistance and reporting on all Soviet occupation moves and counter-measures. How was this possible?

The key was the combination of activist organization, code names and the like with the telephone. Closing the internal telephone system would have brought the economy to a standstill, and this the Soviets weren't yet prepared to do. Tapping and tracing all lines was technically impossible, and informers or prisoners had not yet provided keys to the main radio-telephone hook-ups -- which in any case, changed almost daily. As a result, informants would call designated relay stations, i.e. a person sitting by a telephone, with any news of interest. The relay person would filter this information to avoid duplication, etc. and then call a telephone watcher at one of the secret radio stations. There would be the usual news reporting system checks for accuracy, and then an editor would decide what would be broadcast.

For external news, each radio station had two radio monitors, that is two simple portable short-wave sets. One individual would listen to news from western sources, note and collect any items of direct interest. These would then be broadcast. The other

monitor followed the Moscow and East German propaganda version of what was supposedly happening in Czechoslovakia and would then broadcast a brief resume of the propaganda line and a refutation if the matter was important or time permitted. Thus two short-wave radios (reception of both West and East without jamming is generally very good in Czechoslovakia) and the telephone plus informants and 24 hours of coverage created a far more informed, dense and faster communication network than is customary even in the most news-saturated Western cities.

This information funnel was used by the resistance newspapers in a very simple way. Each press had several short-wave radios and kept a continuous monitor on the various free radio stations. First priority for publication was any guidance for mass action that the free radios called for -- such as the one-hour total general strike on Friday, August 23. Next came news about Soviet-Czech talks and then the rest of the happenings as decided by the various editorial staffs. Virtually the only source of information for the papers though was the radio, the clandestine internal stations and at times Western stations.

Making the Industrial-Urban Complex a Jungle

Czechoslovakia has a complex language which few foreigners speak or read. Without interpreters and helpers, finding the documents or even file drawers needed in the secret police stations, in the military headquarters (emergency plans for radio communication for instance), in the party files (addresses, contingency plans) is a

much more difficult and time-consuming task. All the more so if fast last-minute sabotage results in burned records, facilities in turmoil and the like.

Prague is an old city with picturesque winding streets which have not yet surrendered to some regular and predictable sequence of numbers. In the older sections, where many writers and intellectuals live or have friends, the house numbering is very erratic. Take down all street signs and house numbers, destroy all detailed maps of Prague in the tourist offices and government offices and then let the Soviet secret police hunt for the addresses of their potential victims. There are no scouts, guides and beaters for these colonial masters; they must find their way through the now apparently trackless urban complex alone.

Where can you hide a large meeting of 1200 people when enemy troops and police know the date, the city, and are watching? Where can large supplies of paper, ink, press plates and identity paper-forging equipment be safely hidden when a city is occupied with only hours' warning? Where can faces well known to the Russian secret police be hidden while they continue working? Where can couriers come and go with ease, where are telephone lines so numerous that tapping is nearly impossible? The ingenious answer the organized Czech resistance found: the large industrial factories.

One worker looks like another as thousands stream in and out of the many gates. Large industrial plants are indeed jungles of steel and concrete with many hiding places only the workers would and could know. The 14th Party Congress of the CCP was held in

one of Europe's largest industrial complexes -- the 1200 delegates easily disappeared in the midst of more than 40,000 workers, and there was enough elbow room to permit films and tape recording of the proceedings to be made and smuggled out of the country.

Besides all the intrinsic advantages of scale and complexity that large factories could offer the resistance in an environment free from the taint of collaboration or informers, there was a double-edged institutional sword waiting in the heavy industrial centers. The CCP was always strong with a large minority of workers in heavy industry, and in spite of the Party's 20 years of bungling, there were still actual as well as nominal supporters in the many cells within the factories. These stood ready to give effective and disciplined assistance to the CCP leadership at once.

And the CCP cells also had an armed workers militia in each large factory. Though this total of seven to ten thousand militia could not hold out for long against the armored divisions poured into Czechoslovakia, any Soviet attempt to control entry into the large factories or conduct a search of the premises would have been possible only after the killing of many, many workers. That was the one point where the Czech resistance was determined to threaten violent defense. And during the first week of occupation the Soviet Union was not prepared to take this step of direct assault against the communist workers militia. There was also the additional tacit threat of wholesale sabotage of Czechoslovak heavy industry, through material destruction and subsequent work slowdowns, in the event of military assault on the factories. So after 20 years

the party of the workers found the working class again.

How Long?

All in Czechoslovakia ask how long the organized resistance can survive. The radio is the spearhead and Achilles' heel -- there are well defined techniques for locating transmitters. Here there should probably be contingency planning for smuggling out information and having some of the staff transmit from outside the Czech borders. The press is vulnerable to the shortage of printing supplies as the Soviet control system tightens -- their facilities are spread out and separated from the necessary raw materials, road traffic is light and ever more subject to tight control. Large numbers of foot couriers would give the secret locations away. Perhaps the answer here would lie in using the presses of the various factory newsletters (several such are already in circulation). But distribution is again a problem as geographic distance from the population increases, although it is possible that workers could each take 10 to 50 copies home at night for wider distribution.

But perhaps greater than the dangers posed by the hunters bent on liquidating the resistance centers are the more subtle political techniques the Soviets may use. The organized resistance constitutes a vital element in the political cohesion that is the sole possible bargaining counter the Czechs can use with the Soviet Union. As long as the Czechs remain together the USSR can rule only by overt administrative take-over, i.e. a military government, or try to break the unity by stepping up the level of terror and violence,

as in fact had occurred in stages from Friday to Tuesday (August 23-27).

A danger seen by many Czechs is that the USSR will use apparent conciliation in the next weeks as a way of dividing the CCP and also the organized resistance. A compromise by the Czech leadership followed by the Soviet Union's violation of its agreements -- as is universally expected in Prague -- would sacrifice the integrity of the resistance in return for no real tangible gains. And the great fear is that during this interim phase of compromise Czech administration and partial cooperation would draw potential Czech collaborators over to the Soviet side, and expose parts of the organized resistance. This would be followed by a renewed Soviet crackdown on one pretense or another, which this time would swoop down directly on the resistance with far greater success than before and end up with a government by Soviet power and Czech collaborators.

The same Czechs who were so shocked by the combination of the Bratislava agreements and the invasion will not accept the above version of Soviet political tactics as the concoction of a "cold warrior" or devil theorist. They know their strength derives from their unity and that the most vulnerable point in this would be a false compromise which exposed or divided the organized resistance. But the possibility of a genuine agreement need not be excluded; it becomes more probable the longer the Czech leadership and people present a united front.

Whatever the future holds, the courage, creativity and prudence of the organized and mass resistance have astounded the Soviets,

heartened the Czechs, made the progressive elements of the CCP even more respected and may make the contemplated reversal of history by violence far less harsh than the Soviets hoped.